

One physician's exploration of the ethics in the practice of medicine

Dossetor JB. *Beyond the Hippocratic Oath*. University of Alberta Press: Edmonton, 2005, 298 pp. ISBN 0888644531. US\$39.95.

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This personal and unpretentious memoir reveals an extraordinary physician's transformation from clinician and scientist to philosopher and medical-ethics advocate. To better understand his evolutionary professional and personal awakening, it is important to understand the man and the times in which he lived. John Dossetor, who currently serves as professor emeritus in medicine at the University of Alberta, has witnessed revolutionary changes in health care since he began his formal medical education in 1943, as an 18-year-old student at Oxford University Medical School.

Beyond the Hippocratic Oath is divided into three parts: Early Days, Nephrology, and A Career in Ethics. The first part, devoted to his early days, highlights the discovery of penicillin and the impact of this 'wonder drug' on medicine. Dossetor then describes his very early medical career as a student and his military experience during World War II. His medical education was divided into two phases. From 1943 to 1945, he studied formal science at Oxford University, and from 1946 to 1949, he received his clinical education at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London. In January 1950, Dossetor received medical degrees from both Oxford and London. It was the practice, at that time, that graduates then spent one year as junior house officers followed by two years as senior house officers in preparation for their careers as general practitioners.

However, as with many students, World War II interrupted Dossetor's studies. He received a notice to report to the Royal Army Medical Corps barracks for basic training. However, he was told that the Army did not intend to disrupt the new physician's career plans unnecessarily, and after initial training, John was assigned to a recruiting camp for Gurkha soldiers in India near the Nepalese border. During these 18 months of military service, he found that most military personnel were fit, but the villagers in Lehra had no medical services available. Thus, after regular military medical rounds, Dossetor began treat-

ing any villager who appeared under a certain tree near the medical tent. The variety of diseases encountered and treated was incredible.

After Dossetor completed his military service, he traveled back to England via a long and circuitous route through Singapore, Hong Kong, Karachi, Bahrain, and Cyprus while he grappled with the question of how best to launch his career. In 1954, he published *Village Practice on the Ganges Plain*, recounting his recent medical experience. He astutely observed that, while he had been assigned to an outpost of a dying empire, the field of medicine had been leaping forward. And the leaps were coming ever more quickly. Dossetor then speaks of his two post-graduate years in London, which introduced him to research in internal medicine and further served as lessons in patient vulnerability.

In 1955, his first chief in medicine and father figure, Professor Christie, accepted the position of physician in chief at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal and encouraged Dossetor to accept a teaching position at McGill University. At age 30, and in just 24 hours, he made what he describes as a crucial turning point in his medical career and traveled to Montreal to begin his professional life. In time, he settled on the specialty of nephrology, as the university had no nephrologists on staff. He willingly traveled to Chicago to learn how to biopsy kidneys and returned to Montreal as a nephrologist. In 1958, that was all that was required. There was no formal training or certification.

Part II of the book concentrates on Dossetor's years as a nephrologist at McGill University in Montreal from 1961 to 1969 and his research activities at the University of Alberta from 1971 to 1982. In April 1961, Dossetor completed his doctor of philosophy degree and joined the Faculty of Medicine at McGill University as Director of Urological Research. As a consulting nephrologist in the recently formed renal service, he orchestrated the first kidney transplant between identical twins in Canada. That transplant was only the sixth completed in the world.

Saulo Klahr¹

Senior Reviews Editor

¹Correspondence: Saulo Klahr, Washington University School of Medicine, Department of Medicine, Mail Stop 90-31-666, 216 S. Kings Highway Boulevard, St. Louis, Missouri 63110, USA. E-mail: sklahr@im.wustl.edu

In May 1962, Dossetor attended the annual meeting of the American Society for Clinical Investigation in Atlantic City, New Jersey. John Dossetor's attendance at this meeting and the presentations he heard may have been the seminal event in the development of his ethical concerns. Although his concerns remained dormant for some time, they began to impact the way he chose to practice medicine. One of the keynote speakers, Belding Scribner from Seattle, Washington, received a standing ovation from the 2000 scientists assembled after his simple, yet dramatic, presentation, which concluded that long-term maintenance hemodialysis was an effective treatment for chronic kidney failure. This ground-breaking knowledge was soon tempered by the realization that if every person suffering from chronic kidney failure qualified for this treatment, there would not be adequate resources to deliver the treatment. How could one answer the question of who should be saved when all could not be saved? Through centuries of medical history, ethical considerations played a part in medical decisions. This latest issue of great consequence marked the birth of contemporary bioethics and became the focus of Dossetor's efforts and writings.

In 1985, at age 60, he redirected his career, took a sabbatical, served on committees and consultations, and began to study ethics in earnest. This is the foundation of Part III of

his memoir. He wrote the *Teaching Manual in Medical Ethics and Jurisprudence* with the assistance of Glenn Griener, PhD. He urged that the teaching of ethics be integrated into every section of the medical curriculum, and he sought to present problem-based material in a clinically relevant context, which mimics the approach in this book.

After an autobiographical description of his passage from student to nephrologist and finally to ethicist, Dossetor very methodically poses a series of specific ethical dilemmas that confront practicing physicians and then offers recommendations based on his years of experience and the insights that have guided his own medical decisions. To support his positions, he offers tables, diagrams, and questions throughout to force the reader to think within an ethical sphere. In addition to his personal experiences, the memoir includes three appendices (historical background, which he has divided into four epochs; milestones in the study of genetics; and a letter warning that "our security hangs on environmental and social reform," signed by 100 Nobel laureates in December 2003), a list of references for both the text and the appendices, and a comprehensive index.

This book is a fascinating journey told by one of the world's most respected physicians and should be mandatory reading for all medical students embarking on their professional course.